Submission to the National Cultural Policy Consultation

From: Australia in Cinemas (Substack newsletter) and co-signatories

Author: Kate Separovich — Producer, Australian cinema analyst, founder of Australia in Cinemas newsletter

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A Vision for Australian Cinema

I want to describe the Australian cinema ecosystem I believe this policy could build.

It's 2030. An Australian filmmaker finishes their feature film. They made the film they wanted to make - distinctive, bold, unmistakably Australian - without a financial penalty for choosing to release on streaming, or self release on the internet over cinema. They chose the platform that best served their story, their budget and the audience that would enjoy it.

They worked with a dedicated body coordinating the release so it didn't clash with another Australian film. A distributor took it on, supported by a distribution offset that made the marketing investment viable. It screened at 50 cinemas in its first week and then had a guaranteed minimum run of 4 weeks in 20 cinemas each week (not necessarily the same ones each week) that gave audiences time to find it and plan around their busy lives to see it at the cinema. Trailers for the film played before Hollywood blockbusters at multiplexes so a broader audience knew about it. Reviewers wrote about what worked, even when it wasn't perfect.

An export body - maybe part of Screen Australia or Ausfilm - ensured the film screened reached Australians overseas. A film attaché at the Australian embassy in Berlin connected it with a German distributor. It screened at the Australian Film Festival in London. A community of Australian expats in New York organised a sold-out screening through their diaspora network.

Back home, being a G rated film - primary school students watched it as part of a structured Australian cinema program. Cinema-goers stamped it in their Australian film digital loyalty cards and kept their receipt because they could claim it against their personal tax like they would an philanthropic donation.

None of this is fantasy. Every element exists somewhere in the world — in France, the UK, New Zealand, South Korea, Denmark. Australia just hasn't built it yet.

Summary

This submission addresses the absence of cinema exhibition, distribution and audience engagement from Australia's National Cultural Policy. While *Revive* made important progress on streaming content obligations, First Nations recognition, and artist working conditions, it contained no actions addressing how Australian films reach cinema audiences. The word "cinema" appears in the policy's definition of cultural infrastructure but receives no dedicated funding, no structural support, and no audience development strategy.

This submission identifies specific challenges in how Australian films reach audiences and proposes structural opportunities to address them. It draws on an eight-week public series exploring what a National Cultural Policy could look like if it addressed these gaps, and is co-signed by readers of Australia in Cinemas who share these concerns.

Pillar 1: First Nations First

I don't have lived First Nations experience, and I won't presume to speak to what this pillar should contain. What I will say is that every structural change proposed in this submission- better screen access, distribution support, export infrastructure, audience development, would benefit First Nations filmmakers and First Nations stories. A system that gives Australian films a fair shot at screens is a system that gives First Nations films a fair shot at screens. I sat in a London cinema in 2007 watching 10 Canoes at the Australian Film Festival at the Barbican, surrounded by an audience who would never have had that opportunity otherwise. That's what cultural infrastructure does for First Nations stories internationally. Then the festival was defunded and disappeared, struggling to be revived with the support of volunteers and not reaching the impact it had previously.

Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story

Challenge: Australian fiction films represent approximately 3.8% of annual cinema releases. Three countries - India, the United States and the United Kingdom - released more films in Australian cinemas than Australia did in 2025. The distribution system is structurally weighted against Australian films at every stage; A release calendar set by

Hollywood to screen allocation driven by opening weekend performance to marketing budgets that can't compete with international studios.

Opportunities:

Screen access and distribution reform. We propose content obligations for exhibitors proportional to screen count (mirroring the obligations already placed on streaming platforms); and a four-week minimum theatrical run at a rotating network of cinemas to ensure every Australian film is genuinely available to audiences.

Support for distribution. The closure of Screen Australia's P&A Plus Fund removed the primary mechanism for supporting the theatrical marketing of Australian films. We propose the establishment of a permanent distribution fund — not a discretionary grant but a structural mechanism — to support marketing, prints and advertising costs for Australian theatrical releases. International models exist: the UK's BFI Audience Projects Fund, New Zealand's NZFC distribution grants, and France's CNC ticket tax system, which is entirely self-financing.

Australian-only trailers before studio films. A requirement that trailer reels before international studio releases include Australian content would solve the awareness problem at the point of maximum audience receptivity.

Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist

Challenge: The Producer Offset — the single biggest financial mechanism in Australian film production — is not mentioned in the current policy. The 40%/30% split between theatrical and non-theatrical releases creates a market distortion that Screen Australia's own 2015 report identified. The financial precarity of producing — years of unpaid development, survival loans, producer fees consumed by debt — constrains creative risk-taking and pushes filmmakers toward safe, familiar stories, accepted by the few theatrical distributors that exsist in the country. The revenue waterfall that once sustained filmmakers between projects (theatrical, DVD, pay TV, free-to-air) has collapsed. In 2017, Screen Australia's analysis of 94 films it had invested in found none had fully recouped. The landscape has only deteriorated since.

Opportunities:

Producer Offset reform. We propose a platform-neutral offset at a single rate (40%) regardless of release platform, allowing filmmakers to choose the best home for their film without a financial penalty.

A minimum basic wage for people working in select roles in creative industries, similar to the Irish scheme. A basic income for producers or writers with projects in active development would enable bolder creative choices, more distinctive Australian films, and a sustainable career path for the artists who create the jobs for every other artist in the industry.

A distribution offset. A separate offset for distributors on qualifying marketing expenditure for Australian films would create a structural incentive for distributors to invest in Australian releases.

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Challenge: Independent cinemas (approximately 29% of screens) are the primary venues for Australian film exhibition, yet receive no dedicated infrastructure support. The current production funding system concentrates creative decision-making in a small number of institutions, limiting the volume and diversity of films being made. During the 10BA era (1981-2007), when private investment was incentivised, Australia achieved its highest audience share for local cinema in post-war history.

Opportunities:

Cinemas as cultural community hubs. For many Australians — particularly in regional and suburban areas — a cinema is one of the few shared cultural spaces available. We have an opportunity to reimagine cinemas as essential community infrastructure, the way we think about libraries and community centres. A cinema can host film clubs, school programs, community screenings, filmmaker Q&As, local arts events, cultural celebrations. It can be a gathering place where a community comes together around stories. For older Australians, it can be a social lifeline. For young people, it can be where they first encounter Australian stories on a big screen. When we talk about cultural infrastructure, we should be talking about cinemas as essential pieces of community infrastructure for a significant portion of the population — not just commercial venues that happen to show films.

Volume and private investment. We propose a modern, controlled private investment incentive in qualifying Australian productions similar to the ESIC tax incentive - to diversify funding sources, increase production volume, and create alternative pathways to getting films made. This would work alongside the Producer Offset, not replace it.

Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience

Challenge: 96.4% of Netflix viewing time in Australia is spent on non-local content. Australians express high levels of pride in Australian stories but do not choose them — mirroring a pattern already documented in music (71% pride, 8% of top streamed artists Australian). The consultation paper specifically names "marketing and distribution" as areas for engagement.

Opportunities:

A dedicated screen export body. Modelled on Sounds Australia (15+ years, 1,600 artists, 70+ events, 23 countries), 'Screens' Australia (maybe auspiced through Ausfilm) would provide permanent, year-round export infrastructure for Australian screen content. *Revive* itself identified Sounds Australia as a model to extend to other art forms.

Location Offset rebalancing. While the Location Offset successfully attracts international production, the investment in outbound cultural export is negligible by comparison. We propose film attachés at major embassies, reciprocal screening agreements with countries that already run film festivals in Australia, and a dedicated festival circuit advocacy role for Screen Australia.

Audience development. We propose: a sustained, year-round national awareness campaign for Australian cinema; a tax deduction for audiences who purchase tickets to qualifying Australian films (”reverse the offset"); a structured Australian cinema program in schools; a national Australian Cinema Month; and support for community screening initiatives.

Audience data transparency. Receiving the Producer Offset should require reporting of detailed audience data — screens, admissions, streaming views, territory sales — to a public database, building the evidence base the industry needs.

Closing

Australian cinema is not failing because Australian filmmakers lack talent. It is failing to reach audiences because the system between making a film and an audience seeing it is structurally broken. The policy funds the creation of stories. It does not fund the journey of those stories to the people they were made for.

The vision at the top of this submission is not fantasy. Every element exists somewhere in the world. The question this consultation asks is what we want the next chapter to look like. Our answer is: an ecosystem where Australian stories are made boldly, distributed properly, exported proudly, and found by the audiences they were made for.

We believe Australian stories on screen matter. And we believe our National Cultural Policy should too.

This post and it's co-signatories can be found at

https://australiaincinemas.substack.com/p/what-if-we-built-the-ecosystem-we?r=1egyz2